



20 October 2013
The Twenty-First Sunday after Trinity
Choral Evensong
2 Kings 6 vv. 8–23
Luke 12 v. 49– 13 v. 14

The News – Receiving news: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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For fifteen years I had the privilege of working within the BBC. During that time my workplace environment was a busy newsroom in the centre of Cambridge.

Altogether in one room worked the newsgatherers and newsreaders, the sport, faith, and consumer programmes and the afternoon magazine -programme makers. We sat in long rows one behind each other in front of our computer screens. We were all linked into the international and national newsfeeds bringing the very latest headline. There was a selection of 24hrTV screens. Speakers with the radio station output were on constantly in the background. Telephones rang continuously. There was always banter backwards and forwards between journalistic contenders for a story, and there were websites galore in front of us.

It was a very stimulating environment.

I knew everything there was to know that was worth knowing, or if I didn't I knew where to find someone who did.

I heard every detail as it unfolded of the events leading to the death of Diana Princess of Wales in August 1997. I worked through the 2002 Soham murders from the minute the girls were noted missing to the discovery of their bodies and the piecing together of what had happened. On Boxing Day morning 2004 from about 5.45am I watched the development of the devastation of the Tsunami across south east Asia.

On the day of the July 2005 London bombings as it happened I had cancelled the train I was supposed to have taken that day through London. Instead we followed the reporting of one of our colleagues who by chance was there, as he walked through the streets towards the scene of devastation.

And there was a certain dubious thrill at being at the centre of the telling of the news, of being the producers.

But it wasn't to turn my head, because the faith programme I was in charge of was not simply a telling, but an analysing and discussing and questioning, and I'm very grateful for that.

Jesus was born into a culture of questioning and debate and analysis and discussion, the Jews were and are passmasters at it. In Jesus' day they were still an oral culture, words were pictures and therefore whole scenarios, and stories were parables, with twists in the tail, making you look and look, like at an Esher image where you suddenly realise the staircases don't go where you thought they did.

Consumption is the old name for TB and it was a disease prevalent in Britain from Neolithic times to the 1900's. We now no longer vaccinate against consumption, but we perhaps need a new and different vaccine to help us fight the temptation simply to consume everything around us. Which is why I wanted to look in this sermon series on the news at how we receive news, because I think that is key.

And our readings tonight are rich in the wisdom of how to receive news.

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Firstly, in the gospel reading we are warned to avoid the simplistic response.

I may be the Prince of Peace says Jesus, but it's not as simple as that,

I am come to send fire on the earth; **51** Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division:

Then the crowd ask him about their latest headlines: the atrocity of the Galileans whom Pilate's soldiers killed in the Temple, and the freak accident of the Tower of Siloam that fell and crushed bystanders.

So what happened there? the people ask How bad were these Jews, or possibly their parents, that they were slaughtered by Pilate the governor in the temple itself? ... or what about those people the tower of Siloam fell on? how bad must they have been?

But, Don't take news at face value, Jesus effectively says: things are never as simple as they seem.. don't come out with the slick one liner about karma, use it to think about your own eternal destiny. Avoid the simplistic response.

I went to see the film Fifth Estate about Julian Assange and the story of Wikileaks. Whatever you may think of the man behind the data, he has writ large the fact that a lot of data is not available to the news journalists until it is leaked, and behind the scenes all sorts of things are going on. At the end of the film Assange says to reporters celebrating his achievements: 'if you want to know the truth you need to search it out for yourself.'

After the Tsunami of 2004 I commissioned a Jewish poet to write a short play and we produced that as a means by which to explore some of the issues surrounding natural disasters, poverty and aid. it is a complex subject that new headlines don't do justice to.

So, secondly.

Learn to interpret: become wise, not just knowledgeable.

You read the signs in the clouds and judge what the weather might be, Jesus says, you know that Cirrus means a new weather front, but you completely fail to read other signs. What are the implications of what is going on around you?

Jesus had a particular agenda, right in front of the Jewish teachers and leaders so many of the predicted signs of the Messiah were being played out...but they would not see them.

Jesus uses another picture familiar to their legalistic culture

58 When thou goest with thine adversary to the magistrate..

And he says: Think about what is happening to you, weigh things up, give due diligence. Very often in the Gospels Jesus says: 'he who has ears to hear let him hear..'

Sensational news seems to do something with our brains such that we take on board only the lurid facts and don't necessarily stop to think about the whole situation and use it to become wise rather than just knowledgeable.

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I was on a day off on the day that the planes hit the twin towers. I was at a friends house, the two youngest of our four children were playing lego which was spread all over the floor, as I switched on to get a CBBC programme before leaving for the school run I heard the first sentences of the news and watched the familiar New York skyline erupt into smoke and destruction.

For the next hour the same images repeated: of running shouting people, amassing numbers of emergency vehicles with sirens wailing and lights blazing, a pall of smoke, and the incomprehensible sight of debris dropping from the towers, which only gradually I realised were bodies.

I was a transfixed consumer of sounds and sights that made my path along the familiar school drive minutes later, a bizarrely unreal experience. I walked along surrounded by light and birdsong and happy laughter, whilst on a newsreel in my head the images and sounds death and destruction looped eerily.

That day I was a receiver, not a producer of news. A receiver of an endless loop of disaster. The world was not going to be these same again.

I still shudder at 24hour news. it is possible, I firmly believe to have too much of a good and definitely of a bad thing. 9/11 was an appalling experience, as was the time of the Soham murder story. Every day for weeks on end the tortuously slow search for new clues and details played out into the newsroom, every fifteen minutes at peak times and every half an hour for the rest of the day. I had children of similar ages. It was a traumatising experience, it became a thing *experienced*, I felt that story in my head and heart every day of every week it continued.

And as far as our spiritual development goes the dynamic of receiving news is all important, hence our title tonight: receiving news, the good the bad and the ugly. because Jesus when he delivered news to people, always insisted on a dynamic between he and the person in question.

And so the woman with scoliosis in ch 13.

11 And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up *herself*. **12** And when Jesus saw her, he called *her to him*, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity.

She needed to be attentive, she couldn't see Jesus talking to her, how did she know? But she had heard, and she needed to respond, to receive Jesus call and to act accordingly, to receive his hands on her.

Most often people would be required to hold the gaze of Jesus, that eye contact through which we absorb and understand so much. Our lady in the gospel reading was not able to look anywhere except down, but she was obliged to come to Jesus, across a crowded space with all other eyes turned towards her. And she received, physically, his touch.

And there is a world of difference between allowing facts to flow across our minds, and possibly lodge, and receiving those facts as a reality to us and to others around us.

So on 4th July 2012 when CERN invited all the participants to the announcement of the finding of the Higgs boson particle, Peter Higgs sat in the audience applauding. He could barely take it in that he had been the initiator of this whole process and in fact they were applauding him. It can be difficult taking in good news.

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But good news needs receiving.

2 Kings 6: 8-23

And so we come to one of my favourite stories of the Old Testament, read to us earlier from 2 Kings chapter 6.

Two superpowers of the time Israel and Syria, are engaged in a cold war. (The Middle east does not seem to change so much) Except that the great prophet Elisha uses his God-given skills of prophecy to constantly outwit the King of Syria. So every time, in his most secret of secret councils, that the King of Syria plans a drone strike, news gets out, and every time the enemy is nowhere near the target. Unsurprisingly he suspects a mole, only to be told it's the most irritating of all clergy... a prophet.

A show of strength is always the way forward for a powerful dictator and so he sends to surround the town where Elijah lives an entire army, armoured vehicles, the works. It's the prototype of Tiananmen Square. They don't do anything to start with, just stand as a threat.

Meanwhile, innocently going to fetch the milk from the doorstep, the poor housekeeper practically has a coronary on the spot, he is stopped in his tracks and stares, in a 360 kind of way...jaw dropping. Elisha eventually feels a chill around his ankles and going to the door in his dressing gown he delivers one of my favourite lines composed millennia before Eastwood's famous 'make my day': v 16 we read Fear not: for they that *be* with us *are* more than they that *be* with them.

and lo and behold the housekeeper's eyes are opened to see the angelic ring of fire that surrounded the now rather feeble-looking assembly of war machines.

And the story ends with a delightfully funny account of what is known as 'heaping coals of fire on their heads'. The King of Israel cannot believe his luck, the entire blinded enemy army milling around in his own backyard. But the Christian-spirited Elisha allows him simply to feed them and send them home only too aware of how close they had just come, and what a great friend Elisha has been to them. He is not bothered again.

The housekeeper is the type for us, and our need as receivers of the news firstly to step back and keep the widest perspective.

It is so easy for us to be sucked onto the conveyor-belt of consumption.

A news story will not only be churned out ad nauseum on news 24 but then we can approach it via the web and radio and even still the papers themselves, but most often we will find we are simply swallowing the same material in a slightly different format, absorbing facts and knowledge and often quite shocking images, and conveniently losing powers of reason and deliberation and the ability to consider the implications of the story, for our world, our neighbours and ourselves. As E M Forster so beautifully puts it in *Aspects of the Novel*: P34-35-36 ah yes oh dear yes the novel tells a story...is to include the life by values as well.'

Every week in a small community hall in our village we say compline and we pray for the world. I make it a point not just to bring the latest bad news headline facts but to try and find a story that talks about the life by values.

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Last week there was a report from a BBC correspondent who had been filming and investigating the tensions currently rife in the state of Uttar Pradesh

On a visit to the Indian town of Muzaffarnagar, where fighting between Hindus and Muslims last month left dozens dead, the BBC's Joanna Jolly met a woman caring for a tiny orphaned baby. We had found anger on both sides of the divide in the town neighbour pitted against neighbour, rioters on the streets. A community leader told us that for decades, Muslims and Hindus had lived together peacefully. But now, he said, they feared for their lives.

We followed some of the men over streams of filthy water into a group of small brick houses, through an iron gate and into a courtyard.

There, in the arms of a seven-year boy, was a tiny baby. The men said the girl had been found 10 days ago, in a ditch. Her umbilical cord was still attached and she was being mauled by dogs.

They were convinced she was a Hindu child but said it was only the generosity of a good Muslim woman that had kept her alive. The woman had taken her in, even though she had eight children of her own.

The group of men surged round us as we moved back to our car. One man stood in front of me furiously demanding money. Just as I was beginning to wonder whether he would hit me, I felt a warm touch. It was the woman. She put her head on my shoulder, affectionately it seemed, and slowly but surely, she guided me through the angry crowd.

She would not let me go. Another man started shouting in my face. She held me even closer. And she did not let go until I was safely inside our car.

Don't take news just at face value, Learn to interpret: become wise, not just knowledgeable. Receive or even create, good news.

what a woman, what a story, tension rife and she a Muslim takes on caring for a Hindu baby. Perhaps Elisha speaks to us: 'open your eyes..' for when our eyes are truly open, our fears are allayed and we can live the life by values amidst the life in time.

Amen